
Reflection – Speaking About Feminist Subjects

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In a recent interview about the Scottish Feminist Judgments Project for Reek Perfume (<https://reekperfume.com/blog/>), my co-coordinators and I were asked which fabulous females had shaped or inspired us. When thinking about how I might answer this question, one person who sprang to mind was Patricia Williams, the US critical race scholar most famous for her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1992), who was once told that her writing was too personal for legal publishing, and that if she tried to publish it, she would be seen as ‘unstable’. This never made sense to me, because her writing is so beautifully compelling. It has always made me want to strive to write much more personally in my academic writing, and to resist the dominant disciplinary voices that murmur in your ear words of wisdom such as “you must write in the third person, it gives your article more objectivity”. In truth, though, there were far too many fabulous women who have influenced me to mention them all in that short interview. Another name which was undoubtedly at the top of the list was of course Niki Lacey, the subject of this *feminists@law* special issue.

At the end of the 1990s I was doing a PhD at Brunel University in West London. After wrestling with it for five years, I submitted a *sort of* finished product in March 2001. Niki was my external examiner. I had read lots of her work, but it was *Unspeakable Subjects*, published in 1998, that became a cornerstone, and a turning point, of my thesis. Even the subtitle gave me goosebumps – feminist essays in legal and social theory. Up until that point, I honestly didn’t realise that I was even doing social theory: I just knew that I didn’t feel very at home within a law school. The inclusive range of feminist political interventions in law explored in *Unspeakable Subjects* allowed me to see what I was doing in much broader terms, beyond the law as narrowly conceived. It gave me permission to be bolder and expand my reading and my potential ‘audience’, and to accept myself as more eclectic than I had previously allowed myself to be. And the concept of sexual integrity developed in chapter four of *Unspeakable Subjects* is an idea that I cite in almost every criminal law piece I write, even today.

But in fact, it was the introduction to the book that first drew me in. This is not a typical sort of book introduction. For a start it is full of “I”s. It’s personal. It’s reflective. It has a narrative. It tells the ‘inside’ story of an intellectual journey, and is critical of the constraints of the academy, and legal education in particular. I certainly had not read anything like it before (I didn’t read *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* until much later), and this kind of disclosure is still something that few of us do, especially when writing in response to institutional or sector-wide demands such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In fact, when I have chosen to write in a more personally engaging style, I have noticed that I have internalised many of the conventions and trappings of ‘good’ academic writing (for example in terms of tone, phrasing, and style) even though my feminist – and my queer – training has taught me to challenge and subvert many of these same traditions. This means that I often feel uncomfortable or anxious that in choosing to write unconventionally – using the “I”, being reflexive, *positioning* myself – I won’t be taken seriously as a ‘proper’ legal academic (whatever that means), and that in undermining academic or disciplinary traditions I will

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somehow give feminism a bad name. But *Unspeakable Subjects* was such a serious, intellectually challenging and personally engaging read, at such an early stage in my career, that it certainly shaped my choices to be more reflective and direct about my feminism within (and outwith) my academic writing. It also allowed me the confidence to give voice to ‘outsider’ perspectives, and to speak more boldly about feminist subjects.

Having heard horror stories about vivas, and having seen some of my peers struggle through difficult examinations, I had no idea what to expect, and although I knew Niki’s work well, I had never met her. To me, the thought of having Niki as my external was terrifying and thrilling in *almost* equal measure. I am not even sure how it happened – it was most likely suggested by my supervisor, the fabulous Alison Diduck, another of my feminist heroes. But I could not have had a more thoughtful and generous examiner. I know that I produced a much stronger piece of work after revising the thesis in line with Niki’s comments. And since then – 17 years ago – Niki has remained a supporter, a referee, an interlocutor and an enormous inspiration. Niki is one of the best known and best loved feminist legal and social theorists, in the UK and beyond. She is an intellectual giant, prolific, creative, collaborative, and extremely busy. And yet, she is unstinting in her commitment to mentoring, nurturing and encouraging young scholars from all sorts of disciplines. She is one of those academics that you imagine must have a Hermione Granger “time-turner” device because she seems always to be in more than one place at a time, if not physically, then certainly intellectually.

Although I don’t see Niki very often, when I do, it’s as though we’re continuing a conversation that started a long time ago. It’s an astonishing gift to be able to experience the respect and warmth that emanates from Niki Lacey. And it’s been an incredible privilege to speak with her and to work with her, from my days as an angst-ridden PhD student, all the way to Gina Heathcote and Arlie Loughnan’s brilliant gathering of feminist colleagues and friends at SOAS School of Law in April 2018 that formed the basis of this collection. I want to thank her for all of the many moments of inspiration, joy and angst she has given me, and I hope we are able to continue to speak about feminist and other subjects into the wee small hours of our academic lives.